

Thomas Holden. *Spectres of False Divinity: Hume's Moral Atheism*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xvi + 246. Cloth, \$50.00.

Thomas Holden argues that a key element of David Hume's irreligious agenda is his case for *moral atheism*. According to Holden, Hume defends (conclusively, Hume believes) not merely *weak* moral atheism, according to which there is no morally praiseworthy deity, but *strong* moral atheism, according to which there is no deity with *any* moral characteristics. The idea here is that if any being approximates the traditional notion of God as a first cause or designer, it cannot meet the preconditions for having moral attributes. Holden also discusses arguments that some might expect to be central to Hume's case but which, according to Holden, are not. For instance, Holden maintains that Hume does not even endorse the evidential argument from evil, let alone use it to support moral atheism. Instead, Hume intends it as a parody of traditional natural theology. Holden closes with several points about the historical and philosophical import of Hume's moral atheism.

Right from the start Holden faces challenges. How can he square his interpretation of Hume as a moral atheist with Hume's repeated strictures against theological speculation? And how can he square his interpretation with the fact that Hume never *explicitly* advocates moral atheism?

Holden skillfully meets these challenges. Regarding the first challenge, for example, he distinguishes "core natural theology," which aims at knowledge of the deity's *distinctive, intrinsic* properties, from "liminal natural theology," which lacks such aims. This distinction, Holden contends, reconciles two elements of Hume's philosophy that seem to conflict. The first is Hume's rejection of theological speculation as beyond our cognitive capacities. The second is Hume's frequent willingness to draw conclusions about divine attributes. Holden argues that although Hume's strictures against theological speculation pertain to *core* natural theology, they are not aimed at *liminal* natural theology—that is, at speculation about the deity's *non-distinctive* or *relational* properties. Hume's defense of moral atheism, Holden believes, falls within liminal natural theology.

After addressing challenges to his reading of Hume, Holden discusses Hume's arguments for strong moral atheism. These do not stand out in Hume's writings (though many of their components do), but Holden finds them there. He does so not through overly imaginative reconstruction but through careful interpretation, with an eye on many texts.

Hume's first argument, the "argument from sentimentalism," draws on Hume's theory of the passions and his sentimentalist metaethics. Holden reconstructs it as follows. S1: The deity is not a natural object of any human passion. S2: Moral sentiments are a species of human passion. S3: If a being is not a natural object of the moral sentiments, then it cannot have moral attributes (either virtues or vices). Therefore, S4: The deity cannot have moral attributes. The first premise is the least familiar of the three, and Holden devotes considerable effort to clarifying it, examining Hume's rationale for it,

and addressing objections to it. He performs similar tasks regarding S2, S3, and the argument in general. For instance, he addresses at length three possible objections to the argument, his concern being that if they were sufficiently damaging (he argues that they are not), this might tell against interpreting Hume as advancing the argument.

Hume's second argument, the "argument from motivation," goes roughly as follows. Although we know nothing about the deity's distinctive intrinsic properties, we have good reason to think that most likely, the deity (like any unknown being picked out in advance) lacks a sentimental nature anything like ours. But without a sentimental nature akin to ours, a being's behavior is not intelligible in human terms—for example, it cannot be said to reflect moral concern or such motives as malice and benevolence. And if a being's behavior is not intelligible in human terms, that being is not morally assessable, which is to say that it lacks moral attributes. Thus, we should conclude that the deity most likely lacks such attributes. Holden clarifies and fleshes out this argument, defends his claim that Hume advances it, and argues that Hume's acceptance of it is not at odds with his rejection of core natural theology.

Regrettably, I lack space to give more details about this rewarding book. But let me stress that its main positions are challenging and plausible; also, it is impressively well argued, well organized, and well written. Additionally, it includes several asides, content notes, and historical sections that sparkle with illuminating facts and sharp reasoning. This is a book from which one can learn a great deal, even if one disagrees with some of its claims. Every Hume scholar should study it and every research library should own it.

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